



5 Days with Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau's Background



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau's background once you have read the passage below: _____



Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. He was the grandson of Jean (John) Thoreau and Jane Burns. The Thoreau family was different than many of Concord's residents – their background was not English but French and Scottish. Jean Thoreau, who called himself John in Concord, came from the Channel Island of Jersey. Jersey is just north of mainland France, but is controlled by Britain. The Thoreaus were Protestant and had fled to Jersey in the late 1600's when Protestants were persecuted in France. John Thoreau was a privateer and ended up in Boston when his ship was wrecked in 1773.

John Thoreau Jr. was Henry David's father. John was a store owner. John and his wife Cynthia were active members of Concord's community. John loved books and passed this on to his son. Henry David did not have a particular warm relationship with his father, but they got along in a formal and distant way. John Thoreau was never a financial success and lived in the shadow of his wife Cynthia who was active in town affairs and involved in many causes, years before women were expected to take a stand on political issues. Cynthia was outspoken and had a lively mind. The Thoreaus loved the natural world, and passed this love on to their children. Henry David was their third child and second son. They also had two daughters.

John Thoreau was not a success as a storekeeper and by the time Henry David was four they had moved to Boston. Henry David began school there and later would say it was during that time he had his first memory of visiting Walden Pond near his grandmother's farm in Concord.

Within a few years the Thoreaus returned to Concord where John joined his brother-in-law in a business venture that would elevate the family to a more financially secure status.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Background", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?

2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Henry David Thoreau:

3. In the first paragraph, what information about Thoreau is provided as an introduction to his background?

4. What is the main idea of the fourth paragraph? What is the purpose of this paragraph? _____

5. The passage is a biographical text. Do you believe it is mostly fact or mostly opinion? Why?



Language Use:

On each line below, provide an alternate phrase that does not change the meaning of the original one used in the passage:

1. Paragraph 1: "when Protestants were persecuted..":

2. Paragraph 3 "...were active members of Concord's community..":

3. Paragraph 4: "...a more financially secure status."

Henry David Thoreau's Early Years



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau's childhood once you have read the passage below: _____



Now living back in Concord, the Thoreaus were doing better financially. John, Henry's father, joined a family business producing pencils and it was successful enough Thoreaus so they didn't have to worry about covering day-to-day expenses. They were never wealthy but were able to send Henry to a private school when he was very young. Later he went to the public grammar school and even the girl's school where his sisters went. His mother felt the terms at the grammar school were too short and wanted her sons to have more time in the classroom.

Henry David Thoreau was a quiet child who spent time playing with the neighborhood children but also liked to read. He didn't much like physical play but did enjoy nature and spent a lot of time outdoors. The Thoreau household was a very busy place, where relatives came and went for periods of times, and even boarders were taken in to help make ends meet. Many of the people who wandered in and out of Thoreau's life were activists – intelligent and interested in the issues of the day. The young boy spent a lot of time listening to their conversations and making his own observations.

Henry's parents were not wealthy and what extra money they had went into their children's education. Thoreau and his brother John attended Concord Academy, a preparatory school in their home town. Thoreau would later ironically state that the school "made him unfit for college". After finishing at Concord Academy, he was accepted at Harvard College (as Harvard University was then known) and began classes there in 1833, at the age of sixteen. Thoreau did quite well academically at Harvard, although he did not shine. Still shy and introverted, he avoided most social activities. Right out of college he found a teaching job at his old high school Concord Academy. Thoreau's moral convictions led him to quit that job within two weeks.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Early Years", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?

2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Thoreau:

3. On the lines below, write at least four adjectives that you believe accurately describe the Thoreau family.

4. From reading this passage, what did you learn about Thoreau's childhood that might have influenced his career as a writer and activist? _____

5. After reading the last sentence of this passage, what would you expect the next passage to explain?



Language Use:

In the last paragraph of "Henry David Thoreau's Childhood" what do you think is meant by his statement that Concord Academy "made him unfit for college"? _____

Henry David Thoreau as a Young Man



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau as a young man once you have read the passage below: _____



Henry David Thoreau resigned from his first teaching job shortly after being hired. He stood up to the Concord Academy school committee and told them he would not use the cane to punish students. Thoreau, as young as he was, was brave enough to go against a common teaching method of the 19th century – corporal punishment.

Thoreau had chosen an unsettled time to be looking for a new position. The country was going through an economic downturn and parents were becoming less likely to send their children to fee-paying schools. During this time Thoreau got to know Ralph Waldo Emerson, the essayist and poet. Emerson had family connections in Concord and a relative had been pastor of the church that the Thoreau's attended.

Thoreau, still in his early twenties, was influenced by Emerson, and particularly by his book *Nature*. The two men were naturally drawn together by their common interest in intellectual matters. Emerson allowed Henry the run of his extensive library; Thoreau, who had no money to buy books, appreciated the writer's generosity. For the rest of his life Thoreau would borrow books from Emerson and his friendship with the man was of great influence on his own career. Through Emerson Thoreau met prominent intellectuals and activists.

At one point Henry and his brother John thought about moving to Kentucky where they'd heard teaching positions were easy to find. Instead, Henry ran school in his parents' home for a few years. The school did well but he closed it in 1841 because there were other things he wanted to do. He was still very young and had begun to make short trips outside of Concord. The Thoreau brothers navigated the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and this adventure would be chronicled in his first book. During this time Henry David would also be thwarted in love.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau as a Young Man", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?

2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Henry David Thoreau:

3. What is the main idea of the first paragraph? What is the purpose of this paragraph?

4. How did Ralph Waldo Emerson influence Thoreau?

5. How do you think Thoreau's life might have been different if he had moved to Kentucky?



Language Use:

Define the following terms or phrases from the passage in your own words:

a. corporal punishment _____

b. "allowed Henry the run of his extensive library" _____

c. "navigated" _____

Henry David Thoreau's Writing Career



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau's career as a writer once you have read the passage below: _____



Thoreau's first romantic interest may have been for an older woman named Lucy Jackson Brown, Ralph Waldo Emerson's sister-in-law. Henry enjoyed her company, although he may not have considered her a romantic partner. He did, however, fall in love with a young woman named Ellen Sewall who was bright and attractive. Henry didn't realize, or notice, that his brother John was also interested in Ellen. John proposed to Ellen, but she turned him down, later saying she preferred Henry. Eventually Henry did ask Ellen to marry him, still not realizing his brother cared for her. Ellen's father stopped his daughter from marrying Thoreau. Mr. Sewall was a Unitarian minister and did not approve of Henry's growing disenchantment with organized religion. Ellen also found his approach to religion hard to understand.

Thoreau had already come to the conclusion that his place of worship was nature and the out-of-doors. He had tried to explain this to Ellen, but she did not understand. Henry still had his friendship with Lucy Brown and soon would become interested in Mary Russell, another friend of the Emersons. Mary was a few years younger than he, and Thoreau was serious about her. They exchanged letters that reflected Henry's feelings but it appears he was more smitten with her than she with him, and the relationship never developed to engagement or marriage. All this time Thoreau struggled to support himself through teaching while he really desired to write.

A couple of years later, in 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson bought a plot of land on Walden Pond, just outside Concord. Emerson gave Henry permission to build a cabin on the shores of the pond, which cost him about twenty-eight dollars. Thoreau then decided he could live on twenty-seven cents a week, doing manual labor once in a while, and lead a very simple life, devoting himself to reading and writing. He only lived at Walden Pond for two years, but it was during that time he wrote his iconic work *Walden*.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Writing Career", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?

2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Thoreau:

3. Why do you think young women of Thoreau's time would have not understood his approach to religion?

4. What is the main idea of the last paragraph of this passage? What details does the writer include to support the main idea? _____



Language Use:

Using descriptive language, explain what you think it was like to live in mid-19th century New England. Write a paragraph of 75-100 words.

Henry David Thoreau's Last Years



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau's early career as a writer once you have read the passage below: _____



While at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau wrote *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*. The first book told of his and his brother's explorations of nearby rivers. The second, *Walden*, would be the work for which he would be most remembered.

Thoreau had been interested in a movement known as Transcendentalism. It was centered in New England and grew out a group of Unitarians church members dissatisfaction with society, which they felt eroded the inherent innocence of people. Transcendentalism was about the relationship between people and nature. Henry, like many New England intellectuals, supported the burgeoning Abolitionist movement. He refused to pay a poll tax because of his stand against slavery and was jailed. An unknown person, probably an aunt, paid the tax and he only spent one night in jail. Thoreau was not happy that his act of civil disobedience was foiled. He went on to write the essay "Resistance to Civil Government", better known under its later name as "Civil Disobedience". The essay was published in 1849 the same year as *A Year on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

In 1854, as he contined to support the Abolitionist movement and live a simple life, Thoreau's *Walden* was published. His first book had not been a success but *Walden* did well. Thoreau began to travel more, mostly in New England and north into Quebec. He often traveled by foot and canoe. Thoreau published three travel books and went on a lecture tour.

Thoreau kept an extensive journal that was published posthumously in 1906. He had never been healthy and had suffered through several bouts of tuberculosis. In 1861, after his last long trip through the U.S. and Canada, he realized his death was near, and spent his last months readying his papers for publication. He died at the age of only forty-four in 1862.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Last Years", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?

2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Thoreau:

3. What is the main idea of the second paragraph? What is the purpose of this paragraph?

4. Does this passage show any evidence to support the idea that Thoreau was successful during his lifetime? If you agree, write an example below. _____

5. Briefly summarize Thoreau's life in his later years, after he had become an established writer.



Language Use:

An epitaph is a short text or saying that honors someone who has died. Write a sentence or two that you think sums up the life of Henry David Thoreau:

A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. He was the grandson of Jean (John) Thoreau and Jane Burns. The Thoreau family was different than most of the people who lived in Concord – their background was not English but French and Scottish. Jean Thoreau, who called himself John in Concord, came from the Channel Island of Jersey. Jersey is just north of mainland France, but is controlled by Britain. The Thoreaus were Protestant and had fled to Jersey in the late 1600's when Protestants were persecuted in France. John Thoreau was a privateer and ended up in Boston when his ship was wrecked in 1773. He decided to stay.

John Thoreau Jr. was Henry David's father and owned a store. John and his wife Cynthia were active members of Concord's community. John was a great reader and passed this on to his son (born David Henry, he later switched the order of his names). Henry David did not have a particular warm relationship with his father, but they got along in a formal and distant way. John Thoreau was never a financial success and lived in the shadow of his wife Cynthia who was active in town affairs and involved in many causes, years before women were expected to take a stand on political issues. Cynthia was outspoken and interested in many things. Both John and Cynthia loved the natural world, and passed this on to their four children. Henry David was their third child and second son. They also had two daughters.

John Thoreau was not a success as a storekeeper and by the time Henry David was four they had moved to Boston. Henry David began school there and later would say it was during that time he had his first memory of visiting Walden Pond near his grandmother's farm in Concord.

Within a few years the Thoreaus returned to Concord where John joined his brother-in-law in a business venture that would elevate the family to a more financially secure status.

Now living back in Concord, the Thoreaus were doing better financially. John, Henry's father, joined a family business producing pencils and it was successful enough to support the Thoreaus so they didn't have to worry about money. They were never wealthy but were able to send Henry to a private school when he was very young. Later he went to the public grammar school and even the girl's school where his sisters went. His mother felt the terms at the grammar school were too short and wanted her sons to have more time in the classroom.

Henry David Thoreau was a quiet child who spent some time with the neighborhood children but also liked to read. He didn't much like physical play but did enjoy nature and spent a lot of time outdoors. The Thoreau household was a very busy place, where several relatives came and went for periods of times, and even boarders were taken in to help make ends meet. Many of the people who wandered in and out of Thoreau's life were activists – intelligent and interested in the issues of the day. The young boy probably spent a lot of time listening to their conversations and making his own observations.

Henry's parents were not wealthy and what extra money they had went into their children's education.



This stamp commemorating Henry David Thoreau, was issued in 1965.

Thoreau and his brother John attended Concord Academy, a preparatory school in their home town. Thoreau would later ironically state that the school “made him unfit for college”. After finishing at Concord Academy, he was accepted at Harvard College (as Harvard University was known) and began classes there in 1833, at the age of sixteen.

Thoreau did quite well academically at Harvard, although he did not shine. Still shy and introverted, he avoided most social activities. Right out of college he found a teaching job at his old high school – Concord Academy. This position was short-lived; Thoreau’s moral convictions led him to quit within two weeks.

Henry David Thoreau resigned from his first teaching job shortly after being hired. He stood up to the Concord Academy school committee and told them he would not use the cane to punish students. Thoreau, as young as he was, was brave enough to go against a common teaching method of the 19th century – corporal punishment.

Thoreau had chosen an unsettled time to be looking for a new position. The country was going through an economic downturn and parents were becoming less likely to send their children to fee-paying schools. While Thoreau was looking for a new job, he got to know Ralph Waldo Emerson, the essayist and poet. Emerson had family connections in Concord and a relative had been pastor of the church that the Thoreau’s attended. By 1834 Emerson was a Concord clergyman himself – and Thoreau also remembered him from Harvard where the writer had been on the Board of Overseers.

Thoreau, still in his early twenties, was influenced by Emerson, and particularly by his book *Nature*. The two men were naturally drawn together by their common interest in intellectual matters. Emerson allowed Henry the run of his extensive library, and Thoreau, who had no money to buy books, appreciated the writer’s generosity. For the rest of his life Thoreau would borrow books from Emerson and his friendship with the man was of great influence on his own career. Through the writer Thoreau met many prominent intellectuals and activists.

At one point Henry and his brother John thought about moving to Kentucky where they’d heard teaching positions were easy to find. They changed their minds about this and Henry set up a school in his parents’ home, which he ran for a few years. The school did well but he closed it in 1841 because there were other things he wanted to do. He was still very young and had begun to make short trips outside of Concord. The Thoreau brothers navigated the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and this adventure would be chronicled in his first book. Around this time Henry David would also be thwarted in love.

Thoreau’s first romantic interest may have been for an older woman named Lucy Jackson Brown, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s sister-in-law. Lucy’s husband had abandoned her and Henry enjoyed her company, although he may not have considered her a romantic partner. He did, however, fall in love with a young woman named Ellen Sewall who was bright and attractive. Henry didn’t realize, or notice, that his brother John was also interested in Ellen. John proposed to Ellen, but she turned him down, later saying she preferred Henry. Eventually Henry did ask Ellen to marry him, still not realizing his brother had proposed as well. Ellen’s father stepped in and stopped his daughter from marrying Thoreau. Mr. Sewall was a Unitarian minister and did not approve of Henry’s growing disenchantment with organized religion. Ellen too found the young man’s lack of church attendance a problem for her.

Thoreau had already come to the conclusion that his place of worship was nature and the out-of-doors. He had tried to explain this to Ellen, but she did not understand. Henry still had his friendship with

Lucy Brown and All this time Thoreau struggled to support himself through teaching while he really desired to write. He soon would become interested in Mary Russell, another friend of the Emersons. Mary was a few years younger than he, and he was serious about her. They exchanged letters which reflected Henry's feelings but it appears he was more smitten with her than she with him, and the relationship never developed to engagement or marriage.

A couple of years later, in 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson bought a plot of land on Walden Pond, just outside Concord. Emerson gave Henry permission to build his own cabin on the shores of the pond, costing him about twenty-eight dollars. Thoreau then decided he could live on twenty-seven cents a week, doing manual labor once in a while, and lead a very simple life, devoting himself to reading and writing. He only lived at Walden Pond for two years, but it was during that time he wrote his iconic work.

While he lived at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau wrote *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*. The first book told of his and his brother's explorations of nearby rivers. The second, *Walden*, would be the work he would be most remembered for.

Thoreau, along with his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, had been interested in a movement known as Transcendentalism. It was centered in New England and grew out of some Unitarians' dissatisfaction with society, which they felt corrupted the inherent innocence of people. Transcendentalism was very concerned about the relationship between people and nature. Henry, like many other New England intellectuals, supported the burgeoning Abolitionist movement. He refused to pay a tax to the government because of his stand against slavery and after three years, was put in jail. An unknown person, probably an aunt, paid the tax and he only spent one night imprisoned. Thoreau was not happy – his act of civil disobedience seemingly foiled. But he went on to write the essay "Resistance to Civil Government", better known under its later name as "Civil Disobedience". The essay was published in 1849 and in the same year, *A Year on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* appeared in bookstores.

In 1854, continuing to support the Abolitionist movement and living a simple life, Thoreau's *Walden* was published. His first book had not been a success but *Walden* did well. Thoreau began to travel more, mostly in New England and north into Quebec. He often traveled by foot and by canoe and planned his trips in meticulous detail. Thoreau published three travel books and went on a lecture tour, which was a popular way for 19th century writers to promote their books and meet their readers and the press.

Thoreau kept an extensive journal that was published posthumously in 1906, in fourteen volumes, forty-six years after his death in 1862. He had never been particularly healthy individual and had suffered through several bouts of tuberculosis. In 1861, after his last long trip through the U.S. and Canada, he realized his death was near, and spent his last ten months readying his papers for publication. He died at the age of only forty-four.

Photo credits: Thoreau stamp
(www.wikicommons.com - Jonathunder)
Thoreau's gravestone:
(www.wikicommons.com - Bikeable)



Above: The grave of Henry David Thoreau and other family members, Concord, MA.

A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau

Short essay questions:

1. After reading “A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau” discuss what you believe are the important influences on the author’s career as a writer. Discuss at least 3 influences. Show how his early life might have related to what happened later in his life.
2. What is the difference between fact and opinion when writing a biography or a biographical sketch? What should a biography writer do when expressing opinions about their subject?
3. Do you think “A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau” offers more opinions or more facts? Do you think more of one or the other would have made the passage more interesting? Support your answer.
4. What is the writer of the passage’s purpose in discussing Thoreau’s life as a young man? Explain why you think that is the purpose.
5. How can a reader better appreciate an essay, poem, or novel if it is written in a different time period than his or her own, or if the values it expresses are from a different culture? For example, what could a reader do before even beginning to read the written work?
6. Biographies are a study of one person’s life by another individual. In many cases, the writer never knew their subject personally. What sources of information can a biographer use to find out more about their subject?
7. Do you know more about Thoreau now that you did before you read “A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau”? List three things that you didn’t know about Thoreau that you found interesting and gave you a better understanding of the kind of man he was.

"Five Days with Henry David Thoreau" is designed as a multi-purpose reading and writing assignment for high school students for either Language Arts or History. Each passage can be used individually or all five may be assigned as the teacher wishes - in class for five days, as homework assignments, as independent projects, etc. I have also included the five passages as one continuous reading passage (with slight changes) if the teacher prefers to use the material in a different manner.

Each of the individual passages have questions on the right side of the page - they can therefore be used in class as bellringer activities.

As informational texts, the passages can be used even if the students are not studying Thoreau they would work very well with any unit on general biography.

Several years ago I gathered a lot of information on Thoreau for another purpose. I researched his life from reputable biographies and selected internet sites (no Wikipedia!). All photos used in this product are from Wiki Commons and are in the public domain.

Please respect my copyright on this product and purchase additional licenses from TeachersPayTeachers for other than your own classroom use.

Common Core Standards Alignment:

English Language Arts Standards >> Reading: Informational Text >> Grade 9-10

Key Ideas and Details

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

Craft and Structure

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau Answer Key

Short essay questions:

1. After reading “A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau” discuss what you believe are the important influences on the author’s career as a writer. Discuss at least 3 influences. Show how his early life might have related to what happened later in his life. Answers will vary but might include his mother’s interest in activism, his education (prep school and college), his friendship with Emerson.
2. What is the difference between fact and opinion when writing a biography or a biographical sketch? What should a biography writer do when expressing opinions about their subject? In a biography facts are extremely important to explain how a subject’s life turns out as it does. If a writer expresses opinions about their subject, he or she should be able to back them up by showing well-researched examples from the subject’s life and discuss cause and effect.
3. Do you think “A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau” offers more opinions or more facts? Do you think more of one or the other would have made the passage more interesting? Support your answer. It offers more facts than opinions. Answers to the second part of the question will vary.
4. What is the writer of the passage’s purpose in discussing Thoreau’s life as a young man? Explain why you think that is the purpose. Answers will vary but should include the fact that he was exposed to activists early in life, including the people who visited the Thoreau home, and his relationship with Emerson and these conditions probably contributed to his interest in activism and philosophy.
5. How can a reader better appreciate an essay, poem, or novel if it is written in a different time period than his or her own, or if the values it expresses are from a different culture? For example, what could a reader do before even beginning to read the written work? Answers will vary but might include that a reader could explore the historical period or the culture of the piece of writing by doing research about the time or the place.
6. Biographies are a study of one person’s life by another individual. In many cases, the writer never knew their subject personally. What sources of information can a biographer use to find out more about their subject? Answers will vary but might include personal letters, diaries, journals, interviews, obituaries, contemporary newspaper reports, etc (in Shakespeare’s case they might also look at legal documents).
7. Do you know more about Thoreau now that you did before you read “A Short Biography of Henry David Thoreau”? List three things that you didn’t know about Thoreau that you found interesting and gave you a better understanding of the kind of man he was. Answers will vary.

Henry David Thoreau's Background

Answer Key



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau's background once you have read the passage below: Answers will vary.



Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. He was the grandson of Jean (John) Thoreau and Jane Burns. The Thoreau family was different than many of Concord's residents – their background was not English but French and Scottish. Jean Thoreau, who called himself John in Concord, came from the Channel Island of Jersey. Jersey is just north of mainland France, but is controlled by Britain. The Thoreaus were Protestant and had fled to Jersey in the late 1600's when Protestants were persecuted in France. John Thoreau was a privateer and ended up in Boston when his ship was wrecked in 1773.

John Thoreau Jr. was Henry David's father. John was a store owner. John and his wife Cynthia were active members of Concord's community. John loved books and passed this on to his son. Henry David did not have a particular warm relationship with his father, but they got along in a formal and distant way. John Thoreau was never a financial success and lived in the shadow of his wife Cynthia who was active in town affairs and involved in many causes, years before women were expected to take a stand on political issues. Cynthia was outspoken and had a lively mind. The Thoreaus loved the natural world, and passed this love on to their children. Henry David was their third child and second son. They also had two daughters.

John Thoreau was not a success as a storekeeper and by the time Henry David was four they had moved to Boston. Henry David began school there and later would say it was during that time he had his first memory of visiting Walden Pond near his grandmother's farm in Concord.

Within a few years the Thoreaus returned to Concord where John joined his brother-in-law in a business venture that would elevate the family to a more financially secure status.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Background", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read? Answers will vary.
2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Henry David Thoreau: Answers will vary.
3. In the first paragraph, what information about Thoreau is provided as an introduction to his background? The reader learns about his ethnic background (Protestant French and Scottish) and that his grandfather was an immigrant from the Channel Island of Jersey.
4. What is the main idea of the fourth paragraph? What is the purpose of this paragraph? The main idea is that the Thoreaus returned to Concord and would experience better financial circumstances. The purpose is to create an introduction to the next section which tell the reader more about Thoreau's life in Concord.
5. The passage is a biographical text. Do you believe it is mostly fact or mostly opinion? Why? Answers will vary, but students should recognize that it is mostly fact-based.



Language Use:

On each line below, provide an alternate phrase that does not change the meaning of the original one used in the passage:

1. Paragraph 1: "when Protestants were persecuted..": Examples: "the Protestants (or non-Catholics) were tortured/outlawed/hounded/expelled/tyrannized," etc.
2. Paragraph 3: "...were active members of Concord's community..": Example: "the Thoreaus participated in Concord society".
3. Paragraph 4: Example: "...a more financially secure status." Example: "...a better economic situation."

Henry David Thoreau's Early Years

Answer Key



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Shakespeare's childhood once you have read the passage below: Answers will vary.



Now living back in Concord, the Thoreaus were doing better financially. John, Henry's father, joined a family business producing pencils and it was successful enough to support the Thoreaus so they didn't have to worry about money. They were never wealthy but were able to send Henry to a private school when he was very young. Later he went to the public grammar school and even the girl's school where his sisters went. His mother felt the terms at the grammar school were too short and wanted her sons to have more time in the classroom.

Henry David Thoreau was a quiet child who spent some time with the neighborhood children but also liked to read. He didn't much like physical play but did enjoy nature and spent a lot of time outdoors. The Thoreau household was a very busy place, where several relatives came and went for periods of times, and even boarders were taken in to help make ends meet. Many of the people who wandered in and out of Thoreau's life were activists – intelligent and interested in the issues of the day. The young boy probably spent a lot of time listening to their conversations and making his own observations.

Henry's parents were not wealthy and what extra money they had went into their children's education. Thoreau and his brother John attended Concord Academy, a preparatory school in their home town. Thoreau would later ironically state that the school "made him unfit for college". After finishing at Concord Academy, he was accepted at Harvard College (as Harvard University was known) and began classes there in 1833, at the age of sixteen. Thoreau did quite well academically at Harvard, although he did not shine. Still shy and introverted, he avoided most social activities. Right out of college he found a teaching job at his old high school Concord Academy. Thoreau's moral convictions led him to quit within two weeks.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Early Years", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?
Answers will vary.
2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Thoreau:
Answers will vary.
3. On the lines below, write at least four adjectives that you believe accurately describe the Thoreau family.
Examples: middle-class, activist, busy, struggling, ambitious, intellectual.
4. From reading this passage, what did you learn about Thoreau's childhood that might have influenced his career as a writer and activist?
Answers will vary, but might include his mother's interest in "causes", his exposure to many different types of people visiting the Thoreau home.
5. After reading the last sentence of this passage, what would you expect the next passage to explain?
That the school had a policy or did something that upset Thoreau's moral convictions enough for him to quit.



Language Use:

In the last paragraph of "Henry David Thoreau's Early Years" what do you think is meant by his statement that Concord Academy "made him unfit for college"?
Answers will vary, but might include that he did not have sufficient education at the Academy before he went to Harvard, or that the idea he learned at Harvard were quite different from what he was taught at Concord. Preparatory schools were set up to prepare young men for college.

Henry David Thoreau as a Young Man

Answer Key



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau as a young man once you have read the passage below: Answers will vary.



Henry David Thoreau resigned from his first teaching job shortly after being hired. He stood up to the Concord Academy school committee and told them he would not use the cane to punish students. Thoreau, as young as he was, was brave enough to go against a common teaching method of the 19th century – corporal punishment.

Thoreau had chosen an unsettled time to be looking for a new position. The country was going through an economic downturn and parents were becoming less likely to send their children to fee-paying schools. During this time Thoreau got to know Ralph Waldo Emerson, the essayist and poet. Emerson had family connections in Concord and a relative had been pastor of the church that the Thoreaus attended.

Thoreau, still in his early twenties, was influenced by Emerson, and particularly by his book *Nature*. The two men were naturally drawn together by their common interest in intellectual matters. Emerson allowed Henry the run of his extensive library; Thoreau, who had no money to buy books, appreciated the writer's generosity. For the rest of his life Thoreau would borrow books from Emerson and his friendship with the man was of great influence on his own career. Through Emerson Thoreau met prominent intellectuals and activists.

At one point Henry and his brother John thought about moving to Kentucky where they'd heard teaching positions were easy to find. Instead, Henry ran school in his parents' home for a few years. The school did well but he closed it in 1841 because there were other things he wanted to do. He was still very young and had begun to make short trips outside of Concord. The Thoreau brothers navigated the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and this adventure would be chronicled in his first book. During this time Henry David would also be thwarted in love.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau as a Young Man", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?
Answers will vary.
2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Henry David Thoreau:
Answers will vary.
3. What is the main idea of the first paragraph? What is the purpose of this paragraph?
The main idea is an explanation of why Thoreau quit his first job at Concord Academy. Its purpose is show the activism that drove Thoreau at even a young age.
4. How did Ralph Waldo Emerson influence Thoreau?
Emerson opened Thoreau's eyes to a wider world of books and learning. He introduced him to his activist and intellectual friends. He allowed Henry to use his extensive library.
5. How do you think Thoreau's life might have been different if he had moved to Kentucky?
Answers will vary.



Language Use:

Define the following terms or phrases from the passage in your own words:

- a. corporal punishment - Example: *physical punishment used at an institution such as a school.*
- b. "allowed Henry the run of his extensive library" - *Henry was allowed to use Emerson's large library as much as he wanted.*
- c. "navigated" - *traveled on water, moving from one place to another (explored).*

Henry David Thoreau's Writing Career

Answer Key



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau's career as a writer once you have read the passage below: Answers will vary.



Thoreau's first romantic interest may have been for an older woman named Lucy Jackson Brown, Ralph Waldo Emerson's sister-in-law. Henry enjoyed her company, although he may not have considered her a romantic partner. He did, however, fall in love with a young woman named Ellen Sewall who was bright and attractive. Henry didn't realize, or notice, that his brother John was also interested in Ellen. John proposed to Ellen, but she turned him down, later saying she preferred Henry. Eventually Henry did ask Ellen to marry him, still not realizing his brother care for her. Ellen's father stopped his daughter from marrying Thoreau. Mr. Sewall was a Unitarian minister and did not approve of Henry's growing disenchantment with organized religion. Ellen also found his approach to religion hard to understand.

Thoreau had already come to the conclusion that his place of worship was nature and the out-of-doors. He had tried to explain this to Ellen, but she did not understand. Henry still had his friendship with Lucy Brown and soon would become interested in Mary Russell, another friend of the Emersons. Mary was a few years younger than he, and he was serious about her. They exchanged letters which reflected Henry's feelings but it appears he was more smitten with her than she with him, and the relationship never developed to engagement or marriage. All this time Thoreau struggled to support himself through teaching while he really desired to write.

A couple of years later, in 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson bought a plot of land on Walden Pond, just outside Concord. Emerson gave Henry permission to build his own cabin on the shores of the pond, costing him about twenty-eight dollars. Thoreau then decided he could live on twenty-seven cents a week, doing manual labor once in a while, and lead a very simple life, devoting himself to reading and writing. He only lived at Walden Pond for two years, but it was during that time he wrote his iconic work.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Writing Career", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?
Answers will vary.
2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Thoreau:
Answers will vary.
3. Why do you think young women of Thoreau's time would have not understood his approach to religion?
Answers will vary but might include the wider acceptance of formal religion at the time, that questioning established Protestant Christianity was unusual.
4. What is the main idea of the last paragraph of this passage? What details does the writer include to support the main idea?
The main idea is why and how Thoreau lived at Walden Pond. The reader is told that Emerson owned the land and let Thoreau live there and Thoreau made a conscious effort to live as frugally and simply as he could.



Language Use:

Using descriptive language, explain what you think it was like to live in mid-19th century New England. Write a paragraph of 75-100 words.

Answers will vary.

Henry David Thoreau's Last Years

Answer Key



Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about Thoreau's early career as a writer once you have read the passage below: Answers will vary.



While at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau wrote *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*. The first book told of his and his brother's explorations of nearby rivers. The second, *Walden*, would be the work he would be most remembered for.

Thoreau had been interested in a movement known as Transcendentalism. It was centered in New England and grew out a group of Unitarians' dissatisfaction with society, which they felt eroded the inherent innocence of people. Transcendentalism was about the relationship between people and nature. Henry, like many New England intellectuals, supported the burgeoning Abolitionist movement. He refused to pay a poll tax because of his stand against slavery and was jailed. An unknown person, probably an aunt, paid the tax and he only spent one night in jail. Thoreau was not happy that his act of civil disobedience was foiled. He went on to write the essay "Resistance to Civil Government", better known under its later name as "Civil Disobedience". The essay was published in 1849 the same year as *A Year on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

In 1854, as he continued to support the Abolitionist movement and live a simple life, Thoreau's *Walden* was published. His first book had not been a success but *Walden* did well. Thoreau began to travel more, mostly in New England and north into Quebec. He often traveled by foot and canoe. Thoreau published three travel books and went on a lecture tour.

Thoreau kept an extensive journal that was published posthumously in 1906. He had never been healthy and had suffered through several bouts of tuberculosis. In 1861, after his last long trip through the U.S. and Canada, he realized his death was near, and spent his last months readying his papers for publication. He died at the age of only forty-four in 1862.

After reading the passage "Henry David Thoreau's Last Years", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you find in the passage that you expected to learn before beginning to read?

Answers will vary.

2. List three things you learned from the passage that you did not already know about Thoreau:

Answers will vary.

3. What is the main idea of the second paragraph? What is the purpose of this paragraph?

The main idea is show Thoreau's interest in causes and moral issues. The purpose is to show how he came to write "Civil Disobedience."

4. Does this passage show any evidence to support the idea that Thoreau was successful during his lifetime?

If you agree, write an example below.

Yes, but examples will vary - some might cite the publication of *Walden* or his lecture tours.

5. Briefly summarize Thoreau's life in his later years, after he had become an established writer.

Thoreau was able to travel more and went on lecture tours. He continued to support the Abolitionist Movement and keep an extensive journal about his life. He suffered from ill health (tuberculosis) and died at a relatively young age.



Language Use:

An epitaph is a short text or saying that honors someone who has died. Write a sentence or two that you think sums up the life of Henry David Thoreau:

Answers will vary.